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PMD Pro forward: making the world better one project at a time

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Abstract

This paper looks at the results and benefits of the first five years of the “Guide to the PMD Pro” and its accompanying certification. The “Guide to the PMD Pro” is a project management standard designed to cross cultural boundaries and provide sound project management practices to those working within the humanitarian and international development sectors. It examines its origins and the story of the international development sector partnering with the private sector and the project management community to develop a contextualized body of knowledge, which promotes good practice, but remains sensitive to cultural variations. The paper goes on to analyze the reasons behind PMD Pro’s rapid growth and assesses what impact it is having in seventy plus countries and cultures around the world. The impacts described include an increasingly common language across the development sector to describe projects and increased efficiency and effectiveness in project delivery. In one study, 95% of responding field leaders agreed that the investment in project management training for their team has paid off and 86% of trained project managers made changes to their practice as a result of the training. In the words of one trainee, “It is the reason why some kids in Zambia have clean water, why some clinics were built on time and why a poor farmer in Eastern Zambia harvested. Never has a process improvement training and a catalogue of tools aided our work in the manner PMD Pro has.”

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1. Introduction

The end of 2015 is a watershed moment for the global development community as NGOs, donors, governments and international organizations plot a new course for sustainable development beyond the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Looking forward, there remain considerable challenges but also huge opportunities to achieve the ambition of a world of prosperity, equity, freedom, dignity and peace.

PMD Pro (Project Management in Development Professional) is a project management approach that has been specifically designed with NGOs to improve and standardize organizational processes. Owned by PM4NGOs (Project Management for Non-Government Organizations), it is appropriate, accessible, and affordable for project managers to develop the skills they need to deliver effective projects, and improve their accountability to donors and communities so as to meet the challenges of 21st century development.

The Guide to the PMD Pro is already achieving considerable success, with UNICEF, World Vision, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), CARITAS, Mercy Corps, Greenpeace, Heifer International, PATH, Islamic Relief, Save the Children and others taking up the accessible training courses and online tutorials and significantly changing the way that they manage projects.

The numbers of development professionals exposed to PMD Pro is increasing incrementally and ten thousand people from over 70 countries have already achieved certification at Stage 1 and Stage 2. As more candidates and organizations adopt this approach, a common language is emerging in international development that crosses cultures and country borders, raising standards across the sector, as tools and techniques are replicated from project to project.

2. Rigor and standards

In the private sector, recruiters routinely seek staff with professional qualifications such as Prince 2 (AXELOS), PMP (Project Management Institute), and the IPMA 4-L Certifications. These excellent certifications have enabled engineers, software designers, and other developers to run their projects efficiently, using standard processes to achieve and share results.

The NGO sector, in taking their steer from donor proposals, tended to focus on project design and monitoring and evaluation, setting up projects in this way. NGOs therefore became very good at determining the approach to project delivery, but were less good at setting standards and processes to ensure that projects were actually delivered consistently. Field staff often found that they were operating without a ‘rule book’ for the other important phases of project management.

PMD Pro has successfully combined learning from existing NGO approaches with the rigor and standards of the more expensive high-end project management courses. Tools and techniques have been adapted for use in developing countries, and the result is a common framework and language for project management that is widely accessible for development professionals around the world.

“Never has a process of improvement training and catalogue of tools aided our work in the manner PMD Pro has,” says Clement Chipokolo, from World Vision, Zambia. “There have been many winners as a result. The recipients or customers who benefit from our work in the community, the donors who are getting value for money, the staff who are now confidently managing projects. In short, PMD Pro has added project management integrity to our work.”

3. Developed for NGOs, by NGOs

In early 2007, a number of NGOs, including Save the Children, Oxfam, Care, World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, CRS, Plan International, and Mercy Corps, asked LINGOs, a capacity building organization specializing in NGO development, to develop appropriate project management learning materials for the NGO sector.

Helped by a grant from the Project Management Institute, LINGOs set up a working group of NGO specialists, and after consulting widely, concluded that current ways of working across the sector were inadequate. The group tested ideas and approaches, identified learning objectives, and developed an outline curriculum for a new project

management course. This would make use of and adapt existing tools, and set standards and a common language for project management in the NGO sector, around the world.

Instead of launching a traditional training program (necessitating the use of consultants), LINGOs opted for an innovative, multi-layered, approach that could be tailored to suit a wide variety of needs. Free online learning tools and materials were developed for project managers to download and use. Training organizations, such as LINGOs, could use the curriculum to develop bespoke project management solutions for a numerous NGOs, governments, and civil society groups.

Critically, the new approach enabled project managers to gain a recognized qualification – PMD Pro Level 1 or 2. After attending an introductory training course, project managers could self-study and sit an online exam. To facilitate this, LINGOs partnered with APMG International, to help with the design and certification process.

The Guide to the PMD Pro was launched in early 2010. Rather than being owned by the LINGOs working group, a new NGO – PM4NGOs - was established to manage, maintain, and continue development of the Guide and accompanying certifications. It would be a product that was owned by the NGO sector, as a development tool with all funds generated from examination fees being reinvested by PM4NGOs in additional product development and translation instead of profit making.

4. Effective for organizations

One of the strengths of PMD Pro is that it has created an approach that is as beneficial for organizations, as it is for individuals working at a project level in countries around the world. In some cases, LINGOs, or another training provider, guide NGOs through root and branch changes in their approach to project management, and in others, a training of trainers approach is equally effective.

After evaluating several training options in 2011, Mercy Corps chose PMD Pro as the foundation of a new approach to project management (PM@MC). In a new organization-wide initiative to embed project management processes, all staff with responsibility for management or oversight of projects would be required to achieve certification in PMD Pro 1 and PMD Pro 2. In 2/3 years, over 600 staff completed the internal training program, and a further 450 team members from 40 countries, achieved PMD Pro 1 certification. "Project management represents a fundamental set of skills," says Craig Redmond, Senior Vice President of Programs. "If we don't do project management right, nothing else is possible. PMD Pro and PM@MC are finally giving us a common language that has been missing for many years."

"Training of trainers works well because it provides a means by which PMD Pro can be adapted to suit the internal processes and cultural context of an organization," says John Cropper, Project Services Director, LINGOs. After delivering an initial training course, participants are equipped with the skills to share their learning with others, cascading knowledge throughout an organization. "World Vision trained over 100 trainers in East and Southern Africa, and Indonesia. Once a mechanism for capacity development and replication is in place, then initiatives take on a life of their own," he says.

Catholic Relief Services has used a similar strategy to achieve impact in East Africa after consultation with LINGOs. "We trained over 200 staff in Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, South Sudan and Sudan at PMD Pro 1 and PMD Pro 2 levels," says Jennifer Overton, Deputy Regional Director for Catholic Relief Service (CRS). "We have had very good feedback. Many have reported that standards set by PMD Pro enable them to keep their projects on track, enabling them to achieve the results that they had planned and promised."

In 2011, Liziane Silva, after attending a LINGOs training event in Brazil started a small business. Using PMD Pro as the basis for her consultancy, INK (a training organization and social enterprise) has trained over 600 people in three years. "This is genuine capacity building," says John Cropper. "It's fantastic work, she took the opportunity, localized it and has achieved excellent results."

5. Appropriate

In less than five years after launch, and PMD Pro has already reached 10,000 people who have achieved certification in either PMD Pro 1 or PMD Pro 2. This is an important indicator of critical mass and an endorsement of acceptance of PMD Pro by the sector. A critical success factor is inherent in the vision to make PMD Pro appropriate for use by as many people in the sector as possible.

“We were clear from the outset that the PMD Pro approach should be different, says John Cropper. “We could have focused on delivering standard training courses for NGOs but we wanted to achieve something bigger. We were looking for an approach that would evolve, is culturally sensitive, and that had potential to reach many thousands of development professionals, all over the world.”

The Asociación VISION para el Desarrollo (ASOVID) is a Guatemala-based nonprofit and training organization. Working in rural and urban areas, it creates the means by which women and men from vulnerable communities can enhance their potential, using their skills and resources to promote development activities and create a better future. To achieve this, ASOVID works with NGOs and civil society groups to strengthen their organizational capacity, and also directly with communities to maximize the impact that local people are able to achieve through development and innovation. At the heart of all of ASOVID’s work is a strong focus on enhancing gender equity between women and men, as well as respect for the environment and cultural diversity.

“We have used PMD Pro effectively in our own organization, and also in the training of other NGOs in Guatemala”, says Delia Urrutia, President of ASOVID, who attended a LINGOs training event (funded by the Inter-American Development Bank). “One of the things that makes PMD Pro so successful is because the tools are so easy and practical to apply.” Delia and her team have dispersed the PMD Pro model, training over 400 people in Guatemala.

Khumbulani Ndlovu, Integrated Programs Director, World Vision, Zimbabwe also endorses PMD Pro’s practicality. “It is well tailored for NGOs and the development industry and is very practical in approach. It offers a wide range of tools that will help to ensure that projects are delivered on time, scope and budget in a way that that also pays attention to quality, benefits and risks. Some of our program/project staff teams are now training the communities that they work with in how to make use of some of the tools offered in this course.”

6. Affordable

As an open educational resource, the Guide to the PMD Pro and online learning modules are available for free, and crucially, students no longer have to visit a training center to take their exam. They pay a comparatively small fee (usually either \$US 20 or US\$50) to sit the exam, making it accessible to low-income applicants in any location, as long as they have access to a computer and the Internet.

Once certified, PMD Pro enables staff to move more readily into jobs in other organizations, and countries. Some NGOs, such as Mercy Corps, now include “PMD Pro preferred” in job profiles. While PMD Certification doesn’t necessarily denote a great project manager, it does demonstrate a level of knowledge and understanding of a professional approach in the sector.

PMD Pro is proving especially useful for smaller organizations, without the resources to invest in expensive training programs. “Many of the organizations that ASOVID works with are small and cannot afford to send staff on project management courses that can last a whole week. They like PMD Pro because their staff can focus on developing their skills for an hour or two each week, which saves them time and money, and they realize the virtual training is interactive,” says Delia Urrutia, President of ASOVID, Guatemala.

7. Accessible

Of the 10,000 people who have completed certification, 80 per cent are from developing countries. Adapting the course to suit the growing number of candidates, countries and organizations has necessitated the translation of materials and tools into different languages. Demand for the course in over 70 countries has led to materials being translated into nine languages (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Dari, Italian and Mandarin)

with several more in development. The Guide is copyright by PM4NGOs, and distributed under a Creative Commons license.

8. The Guide to the PMD Pro

The Guide to the PMD Pro is available from PM4NGOs, an organization committed to enhancing project management standards in the international NGO sector. The Guide itself is not a template to be applied indiscriminately to all projects and by all organizations but rather a resource that can be used and adapted by project managers around the world, reflecting the variety and wide range of situations that they face, and enabling them to do a worthwhile and satisfying job.

It is intended for an audience that includes:

- Project Managers and team members who are new to project management;
- Project Managers and team members who are new to the development sector;
- Development sector professionals who intend to pursue professional credentials in project management
- Consultants/contract staff operating in the development sector.

The Guide includes the course outline and processes, and an e-learning package with tools and techniques (in seven free PMD Pro modules). A practice exam is available for users to assess their own competency to take online certification, with options for them to then take either PMD Pro 1 to gain certification or PMD Pro 2, a higher-level exam that builds upon the Level 1 certification, involving applying knowledge to different scenarios. A Program Management Guide and PMD Pro 3 (a higher qualification with competency assessment, interview, and evidence of work) are under development.

9. Adding partners, becoming a standard

Since its launch, others working in the development sector have adopted the PMD Pro curriculum, each making use of their unique strengths to reach audiences in new and creative ways. This includes other training organizations. One example of this is InsideNGO. In 2012, with the support of LINGOs, membership association InsideNGO began to introduce PMD Pro. Building on its core strengths of training and convening, InsideNGO offered face-to-face PMD Pro training around the world for organizations and individuals and created unique communities of practice for practitioners to engage with project management challenges. With PMD Pro at its core and a growing project management fluency within its membership, InsideNGO has been able to expand its offerings to meet the needs of its audience, providing deep dive looks into complementary project management competencies such as monitoring and evaluation and tool implementation. “The response from the sector over the past three years has been exciting. Already, InsideNGO has been able to reach approximately 2,000 individuals from 229 international relief and development organizations in twelve countries. And we can see the results – more and more the value of good project management is being recognized. And within our community, for our members, PMD Pro is the standard allowing creativity to emerge and conversations to begin.” says Tom Dente, COO for InsideNGO.

As membership associations, professional trainers, and others within the development sector adopt, adapt, and champion the approach within their communities, PMD Pro is on its way to reaching the critical mass necessary for PM4NGOs to continue to extend its reach and practice throughout the sector.

10. The future

In five years, the use of PMD Pro by development and humanitarian professionals has exceeded all expectations. Rather than seeing project management practice as the responsibility of a handful of specialist staff, many now see the benefits of a holistic approach, in which all stakeholders play a valuable role in achieving project outcomes on projects of all sizes.

Tools such as risk registers, issue logs, and work breakdown structures are helping staff to manage project inputs, processes and teams in ways they never had before. The results for NGOs have been far reaching with more accurate scheduling of projects; a higher likelihood of delivery to deadline; and improved resource allocation and deployment of staff. Most of all, there has been increased consistency and quality in the delivery of services for project beneficiaries.

NGOs adopting the PMD Pro approach report reduced delays in the implementation of projects, improved management of cost, enhanced capacity for donor reporting, and increased satisfaction from staff involved in project work. “As staff, we feel good about the process developed with PMD Pro. The training helped us to order our processes, and to develop a common language. It taught us that with the implementation of PMD Pro principles, we could become more consistent and effective in the different phases of the project life cycle,” feedback, Mercy Corps, Guatemala.

“PMD Pro is the reason why some kids in Zambia have clean water, why some clinics are built on time, and why a poor farmer in Eastern Zambia is able to harvest. It is the best thing that has ever happened to project management in the development sector, says Clement Chipokolo from World Vision’s Zambia team. “There have been many winners as a result – our customers who benefit from our work in the community, the donors who are getting value for money, and the staff who are now confidently managing projects. In short, PMD Pro has brought project management integrity to our work.”

All project stakeholders are accountable to donors and funding organizations for project outcomes. PMD Pro provides the advice and tools necessary to do this effectively. As more NGOs and partners start to use PMD Pro, donors will see more accurate reporting against objectives, and be more likely to fund again in the future. We will continue to raise standards in international development as development actors – NGOs, civil society organizations, and governments – come on board, and through sustained local capacity building, effective partnerships with donors, and further translation of the course into other languages.

“I am incredibly proud of what we have been able to achieve,” says John Cropper, Project Services Director, LINGOs. “With a small core staff, we have enabled more than ten thousand people to be trained in five years, and countless others are making use of PMD Pro tools and resources. All of this is down to working effectively with others. It is remarkable and an exciting time for all of us.”

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